

The Enduring Mission of the Marine Corps Military Transition

Team and Combat Advisor

EWS Contemporary Issue Paper

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To

Major B.F. Revoir, CG 9

16 February 2008

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 16 FEB 2008		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Enduring Mission of the Marine Corps Military Transition				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 12	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Arguably the most important military component in the war on terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern themselves. The standing up and mentoring of indigenous army and police - once the province of Special Forces - is now a key mission for the military as a whole.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

Nov 2007

In the early 1960's President John F. Kennedy came to the conclusion that warfare in the nuclear age, and specifically against the expansion of communism, would require a new type of warrior with new capabilities that would be a permanent fixture within the United States military. With this insight, President Kennedy emphasized expanding U.S. capabilities to counter "Wars of National Liberation," thus creating the United States Army Special Forces with the deliberate mission of countering communist insurgencies globally through advising and training foreign military and indigenous forces.¹ Today, the Marine Corps faces a similar yet potentially far deadlier enemy than President Kennedy faced against communism, Islamic terrorism and insurgencies. This requires a Marine Corps force to conduct the same mission that US Army Special Forces was created to conduct. It is for this mission within counterinsurgency (COIN) that the Marine Corps must create a permanent combat advisor program to facilitate the manning, training, and employment of MTTs and combat advisors for future COIN operations.

¹ FM 3-05.20. *Special Forces Operations*. 26 Jun 2001.

Background

As Secretary of Defense Gates stated in his November 2007 speech, combating today's threats will require the same insight that President Kennedy had in instigating the creation of the US Armies Special Forces but on a much larger scale.² Currently the Marine Corps' largest and most effective contribution to these efforts is the military transition team (MTT) in Iraq, the embedded training team (ETT) in Afghanistan, and the newly formed Marine Special Operations Advisory Group (MSOAG). The MTT and ETT specifically being ad hoc teams of Marines drawn from various units and military occupation specialties (MOS) for the specific purpose of training and advising indigenous security forces in a combat environment.

Despite the relatively new combat advisor efforts in support of OIF and OEF, the mission of combat advising within COIN operations is hardly new. From COIN efforts in 1919 Haiti to the COIN efforts in 1954-72 Vietnam, combat advising has not only been a mission essential element of all COIN efforts but has typically preceded, and at times lasted beyond, full US Military and Marine Corps participation.³ Despite this historical record, instead of preserving the wartime combat advising effort by maintaining units and institutionalize them

² Michael Goodwin, "Gates Offers A Better Idea," *New York Daily News*, November 28, 2007, p. 33.

³ Brian G. Cillessen, "Marine Advisors: Can The Marine Corps Better Prepare Them," *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 2007.

with an MOS, the Marine Corps has habitually disbanded them post-conflict. Thus, when needed in COIN operations, the Marine Corps has continuously been forced to draw funding and personnel from operating force units in order to create ad hoc units to conduct combat advising, organizations to support them, and schools or courses to train them because nothing existed.

In addition to the historical examples and Secretary of Defense Gates comments cited earlier, according to the 2006 Marine Corps Combat Development Command's pamphlet "Countering Irregular Threats: A Comprehensive Approach," the training and employment of indigenous security forces is listed as one of the six key lines of operations.⁴ Furthermore, the recently published *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5, The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, devotes an entire chapter to the line of operation of developing host nation security forces.⁵ Consequently the importance of the mission that the MTTs and ETTs have been organized to conduct can no longer be argued. Indigenous security forces must be developed and assisted if any future COIN effort is to be successful.

⁴ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Countering Irregular Threats: A Comprehensive Approach*, 2006. Quantico, VA: GPO, 2006.

⁵ MCWP 3-33.5. *USMC Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. 15 Dec 2006.

Manning

Current operations have every Marine Corps unit from Marine Corps Base Hawaii to Camp Lejeune, providing what would otherwise be essential unit personnel for combat operations to support the MTT and ETT efforts. One would anticipate and hope that units are screening personnel to fill these billets for the appropriate level of professional competency, interpersonal skills, tolerance, decision-making, and problem solving abilities to be effective combat advisors. According to the recent *Marine Corps Times* article "End Piecemeal Transition Teams" this is still not the case. Quoting from an anonymous field grade officer returning from a tour as an MTT Leader the article states, "The quality of the teams, however, varies depending on whether team members volunteer or are 'voluntold' for the assignments...If you get a bunch of volunteers, then the teams are normally good (rare). If a battalion has been tagged to cough up people, then the teams usually suck (the norm). As long as battalions are going to Iraq under traditional roles while simultaneously sourcing TTs, the problem will never be solved."⁶

Although the Marine Corps has always been heralded as a flexible and adaptive fighting force, it is apparent that the

⁶ Kimberly Johnson, "Corps: End Piecemeal Transition Teams," *Marine Corps Times*, February 13, 2008.

current effort to source MTT's and ETT's is far too much to ask of individual marines and their parent units. A greater deal of emphasis must be placed on the construction of these teams and a far greater emphasis in finding the appropriate personnel. The Marine Corps' current ad hoc organization of MTTs and ETTs from across the Marine expeditionary force does not lend itself to these efforts nor does it set these teams up for the accomplishment of their mission.

Training

Training is an essential element of the combat advisory effort and, coupled with ensuring the teams are properly manned, will decide the success or failure of an MTT or ETT. The specific requirements and skills to be trained have been discussed previously, most notably in Capt Brian G. Cillessen's article "Marine Advisors: Can the Marine Corps Better Prepare Them" in the February 07 *Marine Corps Gazette*⁷ and is hopefully being rectified. The larger argument that must be made in regards to training MTT units and personnel is first the length of time it takes to develop an effective combat advisor and create cohesive teams, second whether that skill should be maintained beyond a single deployment, and finally if the Marine

⁷ Brian G. Cillessen, "Marine Advisors: Can The Marine Corps Better Prepare Them," *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 2007.

Corps should maintain permanent courses of instruction to support combat advising post-conflict. Currently MTTs and ETTs, once established, are put through a one month course of language skills, convoy operations, combat shooting, indigenous culture, combat vehicle familiarization, communications equipment familiarization, and other combat skills required for force protection and basic operations. All of this in a span of less than 2 months and upon redeployment the team is disbanded, the members returned to their parent unit, and more likely than not they will never act as a combat advisor again.

Is it realistic to expect that an advisor and an advisor team with these unconventional capabilities can be created in this limited amount of time? Based on the mission essential skills required and the tasks individuals and teams are required to fulfill, compared to the amount of training time devoted to their individual and collective skills, the resounding answer to that is no. More time must be dedicated and a standard course of instruction published. Moreover once created and deployed is it cost and effort effective to disband MTTs and ETTs and return the Marines to their parent units upon redeployment? Again, the answer is no. The cost effective and most efficient route would be to utilize these teams on multiple deployments allowing more time for collective and individual training as well as giving

marines greater ability to adapt to their new mission, a mission that many new advisors have never even expected to train for.

Employment

Another issue US units face in regards to MTTs and ETTs that would be resolved with a permanent combat advisory program is their effective and standardized employment. More often than not MTTs and ETTs deploy with a disjointed chain of command and a clear lack of guidance, both for the MTTs and the coalition units they are attached too and working with. One of the worst instances of this took place at Camp Taji, Iraq in 2006 and is illustrated in the *Wall Street Journal's* article "A Camp Divided" where the brigade commander of the US Army unit responsible for the Area of Operations and the MTT Leader advising the local Iraqi Army Brigade found themselves at odds over so many issues that both of their missions were hindered greatly, the MTT Leader was "re-assigned", and the Iraqi brigade commander he was advising relieved.⁸ Their key issues: contempt for the MTT and the Iraqi soldiers by the US Army brigade, an MTT reporting to an external chain of command, and risk aversion on the part of the US Army Brigade commander. With a permanent

⁸ Greg Jaffe, "A Camp Divided: as U.S. Tries to Give Iraqi Troops More Responsibility, Clash of Two American Colonels Shows Tough Road Ahead," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2006.

combat advisor program in position and clear doctrine many of the issues at Camp Taji could have been avoided or rectified.

To make an advisory team effective, a unit commander responsible for it must be able to trust in the teams' capabilities in order to lend it the latitude to take risks the commander may not otherwise be comfortable with. Risk aversion, lack of clear guidance for the advisory effort, and lack of understanding for their specific mission has led to a disparity amongst teams and units as to their proper employment which will always result in a "Camp Divided". Along with the training and manning changes that have already been addressed, the combat advisor's employment must equally be attended too if the Marine Corps is to fulfill Defense Secretary Gates intent of enabling and empowering the United States partners in the Global War on Terror to defend themselves. With a permanent combat advisor program comes permanent doctrine and unit commanders who are completely familiar with their utilization through training with their units permanent MTTs.

Conclusion

Historical example and current COIN operations and doctrine clearly illustrates that combat advising is absolutely essential for successful COIN operations. What should also be clear is how the Marine Corps can conduct combat advising most

efficiently and effectively while creating cohesive MTTs and the most effective combat advisor possible. To meet this end the Marine Corps must create a permanent force structure to address the proper manning of combat advisor teams. It must create a permanent training program that realistically trains marines as advisors and creates cohesive advisor teams. As well as create permanent doctrine for its employment both for the teams themselves and the unit commanders employing them. It is time the Marine Corps takes combat advising out of the "break in case of war" glass case and makes it a permanent mission for established units in support of future COIN operations.

(Word Count: 1757)

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